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Dissension in Moscow

The Soviet system camouflages disarray more effectively, but Moscow has had almost as hard a time organizing a unified arms control position as Washington.

Inner tensions on the Soviet side have recently surfaced in a semi-purge of high officials and a big move by the new leader, Yuri Andropov. While not necessarily far apart, the two superpowers are probably so confused now that a back-channel approach seems necessary to strike a deal.

Four different power groups in Russia have conflicting stakes in arms control. The top Soviet leadership faces a basic guns-against-butter choice. Economic problems can most easily be relieved by limiting the growth of military spending. For precisely that reason, Leonid Brezhnev came down hard on the side of arms control and detente.

Andropov succeeded Brezhnev with the active support of the military. While driving to the top, he hung back on detente. Indeed, he was personally connected with the Soviet rejection last September of the compromise put forward by Paul Nitze, the chief American delegate to the Geneva arms control talks on intermediate-range missiles. The compromise suggestion was an alternative to the official U.S. insistence that unless Russia reduced its force of about 1,000 warheads to zero, the United States would deploy 572 modernized missiles in Western Europe. The Nitze idea, which was later dropped by the United States, was that the two powers settle on 300 warheads each in modernized missiles.

Since becoming general secretary, however, Andropov has turned decisively toward arms control. He gave detente solid endorsement in a speech on Nov. 22. He supported a summit meeting with President Reagan in an interview a month later. In a speech on Dec. 21, he declared he was ready to cut back the Soviet forces from a thousand warheads to 486, provided there was no new American deployment.

The military in Russia apparently accepts the notion that the economy has to grow more rapidly in order to sustain the forces it seeks. One reason for supporting Andropov over Brezhnev's favorite, Konstantin Chernenko, was the conviction that Andropov had the ability and drive to get the economy going.

But the soldiers do not like to cut back on weapons systems, especially in the face of an American buildup. They are wary about loose talk of arms control that might dull the keenness of troops for combat. They have elicited from Andropov a promise to develop, if the United States goes through with its plans for the MX missile, a similar, mobile weapon of high accuracy. They also seem to have had a hand in the breakup of Brezhnev's propaganda network.

The propaganda network centered around Leonid Zamyatin, who was, in effect, Brezhnev's press secretary. It included a German specialist, Valentin Falin. A probable member of the network was Yuli Kvitsinsky, Nitze's oppposite number as chief Soviet delegate to the Geneva talks.

Playing on West German opinion, the better to prevent the planned deployment of modernized American missiles, was the specialty of the propaganda mafia. It kept trailing before German audiences—particularly of Social Democrats—the prospect that Russia would cut back its arsenal, and even restrict use of nuclear weapons, if the Germans rejected American deployment. A part of that tactic seems to have been the conditional acquiescence of Kvitsinsky to the Nitze compromise proposal.

A semi-purge of the propaganda mafia has since then occurred. Zamyatin has been offered an embassy. Falin has been given a job as a columnist for Izvestia. The status of Kvitsinsky is in doubt.

The foreign ministry under Andrei Gromyko has moved in to pick up the pieces. During a visit to West Germany last week, Gromyko acted with notable self-assurance. On the whole, he seems far less disposed to playing games with German opinion than the public relations club. Instead of offering blandishments, he warned the Germans they would be the first victims in a nuclear conflict. Still, Gromyko did not reject the midway position, or interim solution, which Nitze had suggested.

The upshot of all these maneuverings is—at least numerically—a small difference between Russia and the United States. The Russians are prepared to come down from over a thousand warheads to 486. In the Nitze proposals, the United States would go from zero to around 300. That gap is not unbridgeable. But there is great confusion about the meaning of terms and even about the standing of the two negotiators, and the confusion is deepened by something approaching chaos in West German political alignments.

Big Two back channels provide the obvious way out. The easy contact is between Secretary of State George Shultz and the Soviet ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin. They can easily establish the authority of the two Geneva negotiators. They can also open up a line of private communications to clear up further difficulties. Even if an agreement proves not possible, the United States will at least be in position to put to Moscow the kind of hard choices that are now daily thrown up to Washington. It may be that the only way around the difficulties now plaguing arms control negotiation is a return to Big Two-ism.

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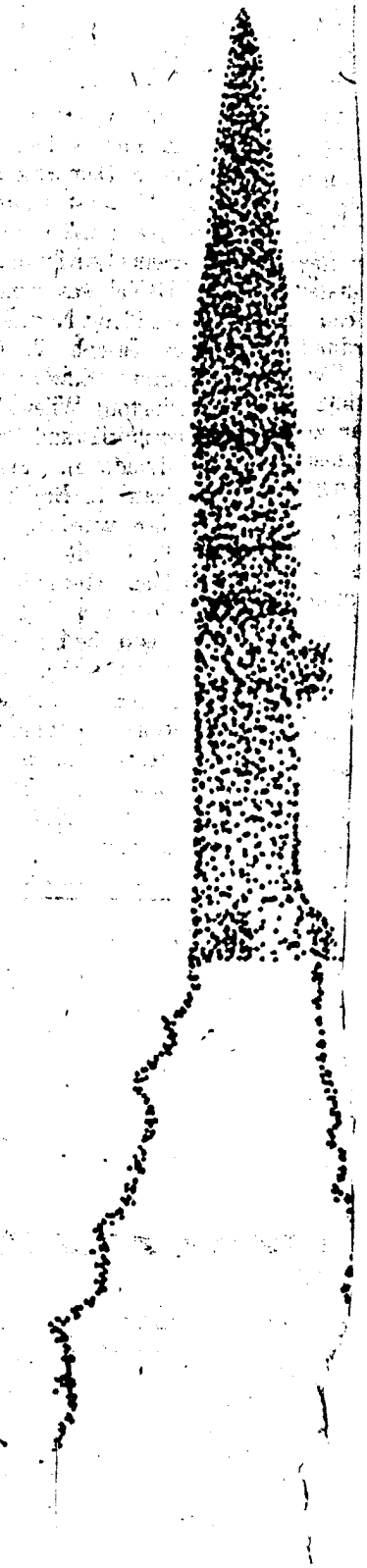

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